

New powers for Mayor will deliver more housing

THE combination of house prices and a legacy of minimal house building have made housing a critical issue for the future success of London as a world city.

Many Londoners cannot afford to buy or rent a decent home. Many essential workers have been priced out of town. There are thousands of homeless households in temporary accommodation.

We need to build more homes across London in a way that benefits Londoners all the way from zone one to the suburbs.

New powers on housing and planning devolved from government to my office will finally give London the chance to meet the huge challenge of housing supply and affordability in the capital.

However, the government's announcement of a major devolution of powers has been subject to much scaremongering and misleading comments.

The London boroughs' collective body, which has seen political control change since the local elections, has argued against devolving powers from Whitehall to City Hall.

The Association of London Government – rechristened London Councils – seems to prefer the status quo where unelected civil servants in Whitehall take these major decisions rather than the elected Mayor of London.

London Councils has also repeatedly stated that local communities will lose their voice and right to be consulted over planning decisions.

The fact is that there are no proposals to remove planning decisions from the boroughs.

This isn't a choice between the Mayor and boroughs making local planning decisions. I have said repeatedly that these powers will only be used in a very small number of cases, which are of key strategic importance to all Londoners to ensure important priorities, particularly the desperately needed affordable and family sized homes. Where it is right for the Mayor's office to intervene, there will still be full local consultation.

Even after the legislation devolving these new powers to me is passed, I will have considerably less powers than the mayors of many other major cities around the world.

However, it will make a difference and deliver more new affordable and family-



Ken Livingstone

FROM THE MAYOR'S DESK

sized homes across London.

Those who resist the devolution of new powers to the Mayor's office, particularly the leadership of London's boroughs, offer no explanation about how they would build the new homes that are so desperately needed.

Indeed, overall, the real track record is that while I am proposing to expand the supply of affordable homes – based on the same policy of investing in London's future that has led to the expansion of the bus service and the recruitment of record numbers of police officers – it is London Councils that is proposing cuts to vital community organisations and which has set out a transport policy based on reviewing the expansion of the bus service.

Devolving housing powers to London government will mean the elected Mayor will direct how London's £1.7billion affordable housing budget is spent, rather than faceless bureaucrats in Whitehall.

One of my top priorities is to make sure no more money will be spent subsidising environmentally inefficient public sector homes in the capital. We need to tackle climate change through the way we construct our new buildings in London. That is why I have a doubled the renewable energy target for new buildings in London last week.

The new powers on housing and planning will meet the huge housing challenge in London, giving Londoners the quality, affordable and environmentally efficient housing that is so important to maintaining London's position as a top global city in the 21st century.

COMMENT

House should be sold for genuinely needy

HOUSE prices in Hampstead are among the highest in the country and there is a dire shortage of 'affordable' housing. Yet housing association Circle Anglia has deemed it appropriate to let serial squatters live in a 10-flat Fitzjohn's Avenue mansion.

The group of squatters known as Circle Community have a long history of occupying properties in Camden. They have a good track record of community involvement and their justification is that everyone in the house is involved in environmental projects highlighting the cause of green group Agenda 21.

But since the Ham&High broke the story of their occupation last week, the squatters have been making money from national newspapers and TV stations by offering tours of the house where they live rent free.

When we asked them for another interview this week, they asked for "between £50 and £100". We refused – and now invite Circle Anglia to show a little of the squatters' money-making spirit.

The association owns a house valued at £5million and has done nothing with it for more than a year while young families are forced out of the borough and the council's housing list grows by the day. You can house a lot of people for £5million.

Let us stay plea by squatters to council

SQUATTERS occupying a disused school house have called on Camden Council to follow the example of a housing association and let them stay as caretakers until the building is sold, writes Mairi MacDonald.

Circle 33 has allowed a 14-strong group of squatters to remain in a five-storey house in Fitzjohn's Avenue Hampstead, until it is sold, probably in March, after they promised to look after the building.

The association says the squatters will save

thousands of pounds in security fees. Now squatters in the old Rhyl school house in Gospel Oak wants Camden Council to follow this example.

The Rhyl Street eight were served with eviction papers yesterday (Wednesday) and will appear in court next week.

A 23-year-old female squatter said: "We are trying to make it nice here and suggested to the council that we do exactly the same thing. Camden will not tolerate any form of squatting at all."

Letters to the editor

Turfed out of home only to see it become a squat

I WAS a tenant of 57 Fitzjohn's Avenue, taking up the tenancy in 1994 and leaving in 2004. In 2001 tenants of all 13 flats (it was fully tenanted) were issued with personal letters stating that the Circle 33 Housing Association intended to sell the building, rehoming the existing tenants, as well as another of their houses located in South Kensington, in order to raise sufficient funds to refurbish their other properties located throughout London and the South East.

The rationale was that the refurbishment was essential to meet improved standards that were being imposed on housing associations. The time-frame given for all flats to be vacated was six months.

In the event, the last tenants to be moved – three residents with an average age of 90, one tenant in her 70s and a mother and child –



The Fitzjohn's Avenue property

were moved approximately this time last year.

I was astonished to learn through your article that the house had still not been sold (*Housing chiefs hand squatters £8.8m home, H&H September 28*), therefore

leaving it empty for a sufficient period of time to enable squatters to move in. I was even more astonished to learn that the squatters had been given official permission to stay.

What of the rent-paying tenants who were given official notice to leave on the grounds that the house would be sold?

This was our home and the three elderly residents had lived there for many years and were traumatised by the forced move. I myself had to move out of the area because the housing association advised us that no alternative accommodation was available in Hampstead.

On another point of fact – an anonymous neighbour, when asked their opinion with regards to the squatters, said: "They seem to be looking after the house better than the last people who lived there."

Where has she obtained this information? Every flat I entered was well maintained and lovingly cared for and I personally spent a great deal of money and time over the years getting the flat decorated in the way I wanted.

Finally, to summarise, it would seem that we, the tenants of 57 Fitzjohn's Avenue, were moved from our homes on the pretext of there being a need to sell the property in order to raise urgently-required funds.

The property has not been sold five years after being given notice to this effect and therefore I must conclude that we were moved under a false pretext. I hope this letter goes some way towards clarifying the situation and dispelling a few myths surrounding the non-sale of 57 Fitzjohns Avenue.

MARILYN DAISH

Former tenant, Fitzjohns Avenue, NW3

Social landlords or corporate giants?

Housing Associations need to revisit their roots and ask themselves exactly what it is they are there to do. These 'social landlords' generally grew out of grass roots self-help co-ops of homeless or poorly housed people, and yes, also out of squatting collectives of the 70s and 80s – the era that the likes of Hoogstraten and co were terrorising their hapless tenants.

They now are more akin to corporate giants forever merging or engaging in takeover bids, while the actual tenants are shunted around as if merely irritating inconveniences.

Camden Federation of Private Tenants has seen a deteriorating attitude of these social landlords to their tenants and has been approached by tenants of a number of housing associations operating in Camden who are tired



The Fitzjohn's Avenue squat

of being ignored and fobbed off by them.

In fact, CFPT fought the United Women's Homes Association when they tried to evict their shorthold tenants in properties in Hampstead Garden Suburb and

the Fitzjohn's Avenue property recently featured in the Ham&High before it was sold to Circle Anglia. With our help and a lot of bad publicity, the UWhA backed down and offered to re-house those tenants elsewhere.

Tenants of social landlords should always seek advice when they are faced with unwelcome re-housing. They may find – particularly if they have been in their tenancies from before 1989 – that they are not obliged to move, certainly not without a court order.

It is highly disingenuous of Circle Anglia to suggest that the residents were given some kind of real choice in this instance. It is clear that the tenants would have preferred to stay.

BRIDGET STARK

Co-ordinator, Camden Federation of Private Tenants